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Mohinga: Burmese Fish Soup

A Delightful Burmese Breakfast To Enjoy All Day Long

By Arousing Appetites - [Get free updates of new recipes](#)

For some nations, the national dish offers nothing more than hollow symbolism for the cuisine as a whole. For others, however, the national dish holds a far greater significance and lends a far deeper meaning to the overall national identity.

The country of Myanmar (formerly Burma) falls into this latter category. For a once proud nation ransacked by intergroup conflicts and civil war, just about anything that brings popular common consensus is a welcome reprieve.

The delightful dish of mohinga is one such reprieve.

Want to keep this recipe? [Grab our free downloadable Mohinga special recipe booklet](#) – including the photos and step by step instructions from this post!

Mohinga, Bygone Empires, Civil War and National Repair

Before going further in understanding Burma's historical trajectory, it's

important to highlight how incredibly diverse the nation is. It's more a collective of subset ethnic groups like the Rakhine, Tavoyan, Danu, Intha, etc. than it is a "Burman" nation. All told, there are *more than 135 ethnic groups* within the confines of Burma that maintain their own history, language and independent cultures from the rest.

This diversity over time has been both a blessing and a curse – more recently a curse – for the nation, but it's nonetheless remained at the fabric of the nation as a whole.

The Rise of Burman Empires

Not meaning to whizz through thousands of years of human history, but that's exactly what we're about to do here.

Burma boasts some of the oldest artifacts and signs of prehistoric human life, especially in places like the ever fertile Irrawaddy Delta. As far as the archaeological evidence suggests, Burma has been inhabited by our ancestors as far back as ~13,000 years ago.

The first real semblance of a unified society, however, only begins with the Pyu. Coming into the Irrawaddy Delta in the 2nd century BC, the Pyu people quickly developed a formalized coalition of 18 unified Pyu states that would stand as a focal point in the region for the next two millennia.

With an overland conjoining trade route between the major powers of India and China, the Pyu kingdom – also leveraging developments and

innovations made domestically – became one of the most advanced societies in the region for its time.

Eventually, the Pyu kingdom collapsed as new peoples, particularly the Mranma, came down to settle in the region as well. On the heels of the Pyu came the pivotal Pagan Empire, which would serve as a dominant regional power for the next ~400 years. At its peak in the 12th century, the Pagan Empire, alongside the Khmer from modern day Cambodia, essentially ruled over incredibly large swathes of Southeast Asia. It was also during the time of the Pagans when Burmese eclipsed Pyu as the lingua franca for the region.

Between the fall of the Pagan Empire until the beginning of British colonial rule, other kingdoms bolstered the successes and advancements of the Burmese society. The Shan states were effective in reunifying previously fractured states and restoring the region to its previously dominant position, while the Toungoo Dynasty was one of the most peaceful, most literate and most sophisticated states of its time.

It was the arrival of the British in the 19th century, however, that completely altered the trajectory.

British Colonial Rule

By the 19th century, it was now the Konbaung Dynasty that had reunified and ruled the Burmese lands. Under King Bodawpaya, the Konbaung

launched a series of military expeditions to expand westward in the direction of British-controlled India, a move that ultimately proved catastrophic for the lands.

What started as a series of British-provoked border revolts between the Indians and Burmese would ultimately lead to a series of Anglo-Burmese wars. Over the next 60 years, the Konbaung Kingdom and the British engaged in three long costly wars that ultimately led to a Konbaung exit and the beginning of British colonial rule.

The entry of the British from 1885 onwards had profound effects on Burma and the overall economy, both for better and for worse. Corresponding to the opening of the Suez Canal, suddenly the demand for Burmese rice – its chief crop and most lucrative export – skyrocketed and sent the economy climbing higher than ever.

This massive growth came with a dangerous cost, however. In order to match supply to demand, the British repossessed and redistributed lands intended solely for rice cultivation. The farmers allowed back onto these lands suddenly faced high investment costs needed to prepare the land for cultivation, and many were forced to resort to deal with Indian moneylenders with predatorily high interest rates that diminished their personal profitability.

So while the overall Burmese economy grew faster than ever before, the local and indigenous populations were, for the most part, left out of the fun.

Freedom... and then Civil War

By the early 1920s, the new generation of Burmese had grown dissatisfied with the growing disparity between the British and the local people. What began as a series of peaceful protests on university campuses would eventually evolve over the course of 27 years to a bloodied and difficult journey towards the creation of an independent Burmese state.

Honestly, this period of Burmese history might be the most interesting of all – and the chief architect of the modern nation, Aung San, the most interesting man – but a full discussion of it would have to get its own post. Don't worry... this is definitely something that we will cover eventually.

Burma's entry into independent statehood, however, began (and really has remained) incredibly rocky. Six months before independence took effect, Aung San was assassinated, and the nation fell into a power vacuum with various new parties – mostly Communist – springing up left and right.

It took the country over a decade and a ton of foreign aid to recover economically, but its peak political instability was still on the horizon. By 1962, all the political infighting... and separatist movements... and secessionist claims all culminated in the country falling into a really, really prolonged period of civil war.

For a region with such a decorated and rich historical narrative, the past 50

years – between civil war and oppressive military rule after 1989 – have been nothing but a tragedy. What was once a regional economic powerhouse has been reduced to economic rubble, a point emphasized when Burma officially recognized itself as one of the Least Developed Nations as determined by the UN.

Unfortunately, this period of turmoil has had profound effects in every part of Burmese life... its cuisine included.

Burmese Cuisine: Old and New

Traditionally, Burmese cuisine has drawn from strong influences from some pretty powerful regional neighbors: the Indian, the Chinese and the Thai. What results is an oddly eclectic cuisine wherein you can have curries (Indian) seasoned with fish sauce (Thai) but still containing copious amounts of oil (Chinese). Interestingly, the intersection of these three influences along with domestic contributions makes for a relatively mild though still highly complex flavor in Burmese dishes.

Of course, rice is at the forefront of the cuisine, although it is at least accompanied by at least a soup, a curry, some sort of protein (meat, fish, seafood or eggs) or both wild and cultivated vegetables. Generally, though, a meal will include more than several of these components all together.

Unfortunately, the cultural repression and overall political instability over the last half century has left little room for the Burmese cuisine to progress

and to spread. For example, while Thai cuisine has become massively popular and widespread around the world (an initiative actively supported by the Thai government), the Burmese cuisine has floundered under its oppressive regime and, in a way, maybe even *regressed*.

Still, as the nation begins to open up, it is exquisite dishes like mohinga that will help spread the word about the magic of this simple yet sophisticated cuisine.



About the Recipe

Mohinga is quite a dish like we have rarely seen before. While technically a

breakfast dish (and what a delightful breakfast it would make!), it is a dish that can be enjoyed at any part of the day. If you're craving for some mohinga in the middle of the afternoon in downtown Yangon, chances are good you'll quickly find a street vendor to serve you a fresh batch.

The core of the mohinga recipe comes from one place: the broth. Really, it begins and ends with the broth. And while it might differ from region to region, most versions of mohinga will make a heavily fish-based broth into which a whole slew of ingredients will go.

You start creating the broth base by “dry frying” a fragrant ingredient like lemongrass. Once fragrant, you add in a layer of water that is brought to a boil.



When boiling, you'll place in either a fishcake or fish filet that will preliminarily cook and poach in the water. This poaching serves two purposes: to flavor the broth, and to pre-cook the fish. After several minutes of poaching, you'll remove the fish, strain your mohinga's broth and set everything aside.





One of the true beauties about mohinga is its versatility and flexibility as a recipe. It gained major popularity among the Burmese in the late 19th century because it offered a cheap, flexible yet still highly nutritious meal for the growing impoverished. As such, there are no real “set rules” as to what can or can’t go into mohinga, although there are a few guidelines.

For one, you can never go wrong with including garlic, onions, lemongrass or ginger into your mohinga. Several recipes nowadays suggest blending and processing these ingredients into a fragrant paste, which you’ll see is what we used as the base for the rest of our cooking. Also very common to add into mohinga are either a shrimp or fish paste as well as toasted rice

flour, all of which do wonders for adding deeper flavor to the dish.













Once your pastes have been added and cooked together, you re-introduce the fish broth and the fish, and everything will simmer together to allow the flavors to meld. It is suggested to let the mohinga simmer for at least several hours to allow the flavors to marry to their greatest potential, but even a 20 minute simmer will give you enough of the flavor profile.





As the mohinga simmers, you can begin to add even more ingredients into the dish completely as you like. Some recipes will offer suggestions for chickpea fritters, fish cakes, lentils, boiled eggs, *banana stems* and so much more. At this point, you have a whole world of choice in terms of what to include.





Towards the end of cooking, you should add in rice noodles to quickly cook, and then it's ready to serve!



Our Take on the Recipe

With so many different variations of mohinga (and relatively poor transcriptions of quite a few recipes), it was quite a daunting task to come into a recipe that we'd think worthy as our original reference. Eventually, however, we did find a [delicious mohinga recipe from Burmese-British cook Debbie Riehl](#) that fit the bill.

Drawing on other recipes as well as our own ingredient preferences, we did end up making a few changes to our own version.

To start, we went with a different white meat fish for our mohinga.

Traditionally, you'll use *nga gyi*, a special Burmese river catfish, or a similar catfish equivalent. Especially in southern Burmese versions of the recipe, however, other white fishes are acceptable substitutions, which is what we opted to do given the available fish selection around us. We also decided to pre-season our fish with turmeric and season, and the former help give the broth a gorgeous hue.



One part of Ms. Riehl's recipe that we simply decided *not* to do altogether was to blitz the fish. Instead, we chose to let the fish flake and break on its own accord both during the poaching and the simmering phases of the recipe.

Next, we swapped out most of the peanut oil in favor of coconut oil, more out of personal preference than anything else. We did (and would advocate) putting in a dash of peanut oil into your version of mohinga, but we liked having coconut oil as our preferred oil.

We did cut down on the amount of water used in the fish broth, but this was in hopes of created a less diluted more flavorful mohinga in a smaller amount of time. Personally, we think mission accomplished here.







So yes, we did take some liberties here with our mohinga recipe, but therein lies the beauty of this recipe. Even with the changes made, the versatility of the recipe allows it to accommodate for all sorts of tweaks while still yielding a delightful, complex flavored dish.

Enjoy!

What would you put in your mohinga? Comment below!



Want to keep this recipe? [Grab our free downloadable Mohinga special recipe booklet](#) – including the photos and step by step instructions from this post!

MOHINGA: BURMESE FISH SOUP

Author: Adapted from [Debbie Riehl](#)

Cuisine: Burmese

Prep time: 10 mins Cook time: 30 mins Total time: 40 mins

Serves: For 4 people

INGREDIENTS

- 1 pound of cod filets, skinned and de-boned
- 1 stalk of lemongrass,
- 2 medium-sized yellow onions, roughly chopped
- 5 cloves of garlic, roughly chopped
- 1 1-inch piece of ginger,
- 1 stick of fresh lemongrass bashed
- 1 teaspoon dried chili flakes
- 2 teaspoons ground turmeric
- 2 teaspoons ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon paprika powder
- 1 8 oz packet of dried vermicelli noodles (will make 1 cup of noodles)
- 4 cups water
- 2 teaspoons rice flour
- 2 teaspoons dried shrimp (alternatively, you can use shrimp paste)
- 4 cups of water
- 2 tablespoons fish sauce
- 1 tablespoon peanut oil (optional)
- 4 tablespoons coconut oil

Garnishes (all optional)

- 3 cloves of garlic, sliced thinly and fried
- 2 shallots, sliced thinly and fried
- Spring onions
- 1 small handful of fresh coriander, chopped

INSTRUCTIONS

Stage 1 - Prepare All Ingredients

1. Heat a small pan over medium heat and add your rice powder. Keep it heating and toasting for 3-4 minutes, jostling around the rice powder from time to time as it toasts
2. While the rice powder is toasting, you can take 1 teaspoon of turmeric, 1 teaspoon of salt and 1 teaspoon of black pepper and pat it down on your fish filets
3. By this time, you can take the rice powder off the heat, pour into a small dish and set aside
4. Next, return your pan to the heat and add your dried shrimp. Heat and roast the shrimp for 2-3 minutes as it starts to get fragrant
5. Take the dried shrimp off the heat and pour into a mortar and pestle with a dash of salt. Grind the dried shrimp down into a paste, and set aside. By this point, you're ready to move to the next phase

Stage 2 - Prepare Broth for Mohinga

1. Start by seasoning your fish filets with half of your turmeric and sea salt. Be sure to rub the turmeric and salt well into the filets
2. Bring a large saucepot over medium-high heat and, once heated, add your lemongrass and "dry fry" for ~30 seconds as it develops a fragrance
3. Once the lemongrass has heated and is fragrant, pour 4 cups of your water into the saucepot and stir well with the lemongrass
4. Once the water has heated up and has begun to boil, reduce the heat of your stove down to a medium-low heat and add your fish fillets. Cover your saucepot and cook the fish for at least 3 minutes on each side (if the fish is fully submerged, cook for 6 mins)
5. When the fish has fully cooked, remove it from the water and set aside in a plate or bowl for the time being
6. Then, take the broth that's developed from cooking the fish and pour it through a strainer to remove any stray bones or additional ingredients. Be sure to fish out your lemongrass, however, since you'll need it for your paste
7. Set your broth into a bowl and set aside for the time being

Stage 3 - Assembling Your Mohinga

1. With a fresh fish broth and your cooked lemongrass, start by either blending or food processing $\frac{3}{4}$ of your onion (keep some aside), garlic, cooked lemongrass, ginger, and dried chili flakes together. What should result is a lovely fragrant paste
2. In the same saucepot that the broth was just created in, add your coconut oil and peanut oil (if using). Bring the saucepot to medium-high heat in order to heat the pan and the oil
3. Once the oil is hot, add your freshly created paste and begin to stir continuously. You will stir for at least 5-6 minutes continuously as the paste fully cooks and even begins to caramelize
4. After a few minutes and a newly caramelized paste appears, add your shrimp paste and the remaining amount of your turmeric in with the paste. Stir around well to integrate everything together. At this point, your paste will start to change color to a very royal brownish color
5. Once the paste has changed color and is simmering nicely, add your fish back into the pot and stir well. Using your ladle, you can break the larger pieces of the fish into smaller pieces as you stir for 1-2 minutes to coat the fish in the paste and spice flavor.
6. Taking a portion of your fish broth (around $\frac{1}{2}$ cup), mix in a smaller bowl your toasted rice powder into the fish broth. You don't want there to be any clumps remaining in the rice powder before you add it to the greater pot
7. As the rice powder dissolves in the fish broth, add all of your fish broth into the pot and stir well through. Once stirred, then add your fish sauce, paprika and black pepper and stir well through again
8. Once all your ingredients are in the broth, cover your pot and let everything simmer for 15 minutes

Stage 4 - Finishing Touches

1. While the mohinga is simmering to completion, you can use the 15 minute period as a time to focus on any of your garnishes
2. With 8 minutes to spare, add the rest of your fresh onion into the broth and lightly stir. Re-cover your pot and let the broth simmer again
3. With 5 minutes to go before the broth is ready, take a pot of water to boil and pour it over your dried vermicelli noodles into a bowl. Let the noodles sit in this boiling water for ~3 minutes before draining and rinsing with cold water
4. By this time, your mohinga will be fully simmered and ready to serve. Mix your noodles with some broth and your garnishes, and enjoy!

By Cyrus Roepers -

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